

Where do you stand in the Circles? Identity construction and language use of EFL teachers in Japanese higher education

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Abstract

This paper is an in-depth interview study of six experienced EFL teachers and how their language use is influenced by the social institutions under which they operate. Despite their widely differing cultural and national backgrounds, an interpretive constructivist analysis of the interviews found the following themes to be a common backdrop in their experiences: (1) identity construction and language use, (2) control over curriculum, and (3) English as cultural capital. Examined in the light of Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital, Kachru's (1986) Circles of English, and Norton's (2001) imagined communities, this study describes how the historical path dependency of social institutions can influence the manner in which individual EFL teachers negotiate their positionality, depending on where they stand in the larger social structure.

Keywords: EFL teachers, cultural capital, identity construction, Kachru's circles of English

Background

Studies on identity and positionality discourse in second language acquisition (SLA) have thus far helped to shed light on how language learners' motivation and investment in classroom language practices can be impacted by power relations within and outside the classroom (see Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Vasilopoulos, 2015), and Norton's (2001) poststructuralist framework of imagined communities offers an illuminating perspective in understanding how classrooms can be a site of contestation that reflects the larger structural inequalities in the wider society (see Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). While identity and positionality studies are not new, in tandem with the increase in the number of speakers who speak an "outer" or "expanding circle" variety of English (Kachru, 1986; 1990), recent studies in identity discourse are shifting their attention to how EFL teachers negotiate and construct their teacher identities (e.g. see Christiansen et. al, 2018). Despite "World

Englishes” gaining currency among some circles of the SLA academic community, popular perception that varieties of English outside of the “inner-circle” are not considered “standard” or “correct” remains persistent, and the impact on “non-inner circle” EFL teachers’ sense of identity and legitimacy is especially acute for teachers whose first language is not English (e.g. see Torres-Rochas, 2017; Gu & Benson, 2015). Apart from having to confront such perceptions from students, parents, colleagues, and sometimes even policymakers, the “non-native” EFL teachers’ self-perception—vis-à-vis an imagined community of practitioners—can have important potential pedagogical implications (Torres-Rochas, 2017). In line with this observation, Song (2018), who discussed the anxiety experienced by “non-native” EFL teachers in the light of critical frameworks and emotional capital, highlighted that instead of something that should be managed individually, the anxiety that “non-native” EFL teachers face (for example, in the face of a fluent English-speaking returnee student) should be recognised as a learned response that reflects the inherent structural inequalities of the environment that they find themselves in.

Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of embodied cultural capital is also useful in helping researchers understand how this preference for “inner circle” varieties of English manifests itself in an unequal society. Fluency in English is often associated with greater access to economic opportunities and social mobility in many parts of the world, and it is in this context that an EFL teacher from an “inner-circle” country becomes the representation of the cultural capital conferred upon him/her by institutions that favour “inner-circle” Englishes, and this has a concrete impact on pedagogical practices. For example, in the case study of an elite, bilingual school in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain, despite a lack of qualifications—other than being a native English speaker of an inner-circle variety—the English language assistant teacher ended up displacing the main biology teacher in co-teaching situations; as a result, the Spanish content teachers (of subjects such as history) were “deskilled”, whereas the English teachers were “upskilled” despite not having any other additional qualifications other than their “life and socialisation experience in an English-speaking country” (Pastor & Poveda, 2020, p. 475).

In a similar vein, though not originally examined in the light of Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital, Torres-Rochas’ (2017) study on the alienating impact of Colombia’s national educational policy exemplifies how an overemphasis of “inner-circle” English

can exacerbate existing stratification and structural inequalities through its negative impact on the local EFL teachers. Not only does it have the effect of delegitimising the teachers' standing and identities as English teachers, but it also ignores the multilingual realities in Colombia and the struggles Colombian teachers face when teaching disadvantaged children who do not have adequate access to language resources. Yet again in another case study in a different part of the world, Yang and Jang's (2020) examination into the identities of bilingual Korean EFL teachers in the British English Institute Korea described instances of how not only does the "ideology of 'native-like English'" and its "English-only policy" in the classrooms favour mainly the monolingual "native English teachers", but it has also led to the disempowerment of competent bilingual Korean teachers and poor student comprehension in class.

In other words, despite being unrelated incidents in different corners of the globe, the reconstruction of professional hierarchies brought about by "native speakerism" (Pastor & Poveda, 2020) is a phenomenon that has been played out repeatedly across different settings. While there have been multiple studies on teacher identity construction, few studies take on a Bordieuan view of embodied capital on identity construction of EFL teachers in the Japanese educational setting. In the context of Japanese EFL classrooms, it is probable that popular preference for "inner-circle English" has an important impact on classroom practices. As public discourse on the "legitimate ownership" of English language also often has a racialised dimension (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), a preference for "native speakers of English" can also create unique challenges for EFL teachers who do not fit into the perceived image of how a foreign EFL teacher should look (see Wu et. al., 2020). Thus, the experience of identity construction as a form of interface between self and others would play out differently among EFL teachers, depending on their accents, cultural backgrounds, and levels of English proficiency. Adding to that complexity, Japan's historical relationship with foreign languages—which is deeply intertwined with its modern history—can also create tension in the educational context, where EFL classrooms become the site of contestation at the local level. Therefore, using the theoretical lens of cultural capital to examine the nature of EFL teacher identity construction in the Japanese educational context is likely to yield rich insight that can benefit teacher development and educational management practices.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Question

The chief purpose of this study is to explore how EFL teachers in Japan construct their teacher identities from an emic standpoint. Two other further related research questions include the following:

- How does the process of identity construction of foreign EFL teachers influence their language use and practices in the classrooms?
- How do the prevailing social institutions and inequities impact the manner in which the teachers negotiate their identities?

As a descriptive study that takes a grounded theory approach, I had to strike a balance between adopting a theoretical lens while avoiding confirmation bias throughout the data collection and coding process. Hence, in place of hypothesis testing using a set of well-operationalised constructs—as commonly done in the tradition of positivist approaches—I prepared a checklist and a set of questions for eliciting participant responses while keeping the interview process flexible. The pre-interview preparation was done to ensure some level of procedural consistency across each interview session while keeping the discussion on track. Throughout the study, I used an inductive approach to let the central themes emerge from the data while trying to maintain a balanced narrative by finding observations that contradicts my initial analysis.

Interview Procedure

As mentioned earlier, a central aim of this study is to shed light on whether and how the EFL teachers' negotiation of their language identities influences their roles in Japanese higher education. To understand how EFL teachers negotiate their positionalities and language identities in the classroom, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews individually with six experienced EFL teachers who were teaching in Japanese higher education at the time of the interview (which was in February 2021). Due to the need to work around the teachers' schedules, one of the interviews was done online via the Zoom application, and another interview had to be broken up into two sessions; the remaining interviews were conducted face-to-face in a single session. All six participants came from diverse backgrounds—and this deliberate choice to interview individuals from different nationalities and language history is to allow for comparisons across a spectrum of positionalities.

The interviews were conducted using an unstructured and open-ended design to prompt responses in a more naturalistic manner and allow greater participant voice. Although I had used a checklist (see Appendix A) to guide the interviews, the discussions in all sessions veered off beyond its scope. Accordingly, the participants were prompted during the interviews to expand on their views while keeping the discussion centred around their experience with marked/unmarked language use, identity construction, and legitimacy issues, until the flow of conversation is exhausted. This led to inevitable differences in the time taken for the interviews, since the amount of thought each participant gave to the topic differed. This exercise resulted in a total of around 3.5 hours of interview data, ranging from 17 minutes to 50 minutes per interviewee, conducted over seven sessions. All interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed for further coding and analysis.

Researcher Positionality

One of the central issues pertaining to internal validity (or rather, credibility issues) of qualitative studies lies in the epistemic and ontological questions on the nature of reality. Because any study that adopts an interpretive constructionist approach by necessity employs a recursive data collection and analytical process, the outcome of the analysis will inevitably be shaped by the researcher's personal experience. To ensure analytical rigour and clarity, I find it necessary to be transparent with my positionality and lay out the inevitable bias before going into detail on the coding procedure.

Firstly, even though my personal ontological position is a post-positivist one—i.e. “true” reality cannot be fully known but approximated as closely as possible—I also believe that social institutions are dynamic and are concurrently reproduced and co-constructed through interactions between fellow actors. Although the macro-level structures that exist as formalised institutions can have a real and discernible impact upon actors, human agency also help shape institutions. Furthermore, I also believe that institutional structures that incentivise certain behaviours have greater explanatory power than the catch-all category of “culture”, which runs the risk of cultural determinism and essentialism. By logical extension, this also means that researchers have the ethical responsibility of illuminating the nature of structural inequalities through their studies to promote equity and social justice in our respective fields, while also realising that institutional change is possible through the actors' individual and

collective agency.

Additionally, as an L1 English-speaking Singaporean who speaks Mandarin, Japanese, and Singlish, as well as having a basic command of a heritage language, Hokkien, I often find myself making choices in my language use to deal with the expectations of my interlocutors. Even as I continue to develop my professional identity as an EFL instructor and researcher in applied linguistics, I also experience the world as an Asian-bodied female immigrant with a “non-standard” accent in English. Thus, the analysis as filtered through my own experience will necessarily differ from another researcher from a different background. Nonetheless, even though interpretative studies are limited by their lack of universal generalisability, “by studying a specific case in great detail and then comparing it with other cases studied in equally great detail”, interpretative studies are invaluable in finding the “concrete universals” in our human experience (Erickson, 1986), and thus achieve some measure of transferability that can improve our understanding on how structural inequalities impact teachers and translate into educational practices.

Despite having established that analytical bias is inevitable, care was taken to minimise observation bias where possible. In the beginning of interviews with each participant, I avoided sharing my personal views and analytical framework to avoid the participants anticipating the information that I was looking for. However, as the interviews went on, there were times when I had to share my personal experience and explain my theoretical framework to keep the interview on topic. Consequently, the interview in some instances became a dynamic discussion about identity construction, where participants sometimes had to re-evaluate their own assumptions, thus turning the interview study into a collaborative exercise to better understand the assumptions behind institutional practices and their personal experiences. In such cases, only utterances that represent the participants’ views were included during the coding process, and all utterances on my part were excluded except in cases where they were necessary to give context to the participants’ utterances. Also, care was also taken to triangulate the analytical process by looking for utterances that contradict the prevailing coding framework, so as to arrive at a set of codes that represent the participant views with as much consistency and accuracy as possible.

Coding Procedure

The data was coded in an iterative manner, using a combination of typological and an inductive, grounded approach (see Hatch, 2002). During the initial sweep of the data—which was done as the interviews were transcribed—I made mental notes on the possible connecting themes between the participants' individual experiences, while keeping Bourdieu's (1986) framework on cultural capital in mind. Then, while reading the interview transcripts, I assigned phrases that both summarise and categorise the content of the utterances, while keeping in the back of my mind the general themes that I had noted during the initial sweep. Whenever a new coding category is encountered, I would go back to earlier sections of coded text to review and recode the utterances where necessary to maintain consistency. This process was repeated until all the transcripts were coded, and by then the data would have been analysed through axial coding that was derived organically through this iterative process. Thereafter, the resulting codes were categorised into several key themes, and axial coding was repeated to check for consistency; this process was repeated until a clear overall narrative was achieved. The resulting analysis yielded the following overarching themes: (1) identity construction and choice of language use, (2) control over curriculum, and (3) English as cultural capital; and it is in relation to these overarching themes that I shall discuss the findings of this study.

Participants

The participants came from a mix of “inner-, outer-, and expanding-circle” countries, and have varying levels of proficiency in Japanese. By deliberate design, all the participants possess at least an MA in TESOL and have been teaching English in Japan full-time for more than five years so as to allow for some degree of comparability. The participants were recruited via convenient sampling and all of them gave informed consent to be part of the study.

Table 1

Summary of Participants and Their Backgrounds

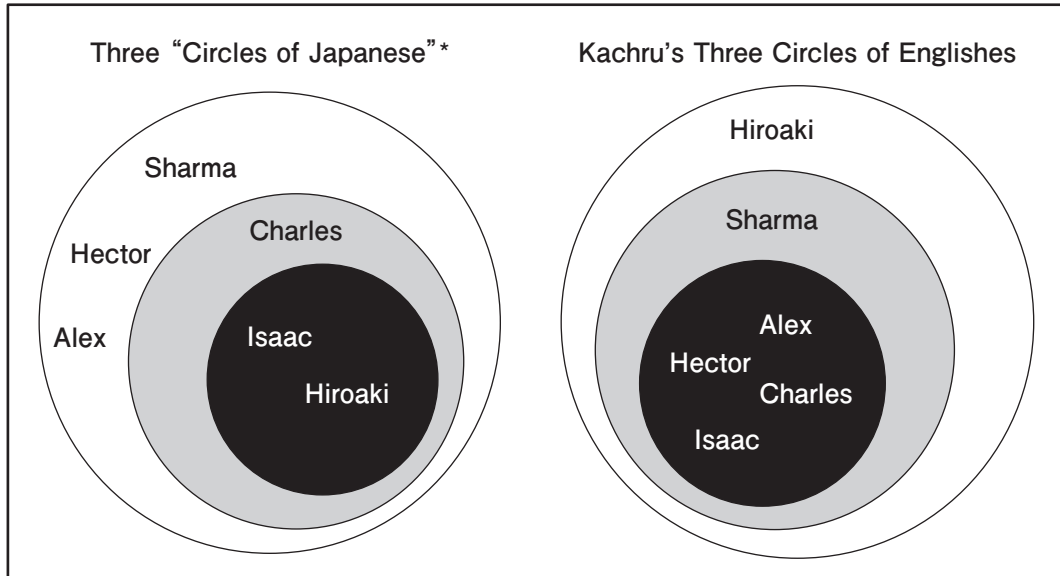
| Participant* (region) | Language background | Work experience |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Isaac (Japan & North America) | Raised fully bilingual in North American English and Japanese. | Eight years of teaching EFL in Japanese higher education. |
| Charles (North America) | North American English speaker. Learned Japanese in adulthood, fluent in conversational Japanese. | About 30 years of teaching EFL in Japanese higher education and <i>eikaiwa</i> context. |
| Sharma (South Asia) | Raised bilingual in English and her home country's majority language, with English being the first language. Has limited proficiency in spoken Japanese and is able to understand some spoken Japanese. | Six years of teaching EFL in Japan, including elementary school, junior high, and higher education. |
| Alex (Europe) | British English speaker. Speaks limited conversational Japanese. | About 30 years of teaching EFL in Japanese junior high, <i>eikaiwa</i> , and higher educational context. |
| Hiroaki (Japanese) | First language Japanese user, expert L2 user of English. | About 10 years of teaching EFL in Japanese higher education. |
| Hector (North America) | American English speaker. Learned Japanese in early adulthood, has limited fluency in conversational Japanese. | Eight years of teaching EFL in Japanese elementary, junior high, and higher educational context. |

*Note: All names are pseudonyms

To maintain participant confidentiality, only information relevant to the study shall be discussed. Table 1 (on the previous page) provides a summary of their relevant backgrounds, and Figure 1 (below) is a heuristic representation on where the participants are placed with respect to Kachru's (1986, 1990) three circles of English and their relative Japanese proficiency.

Figure 1

Heuristic Representation of the Participants' Language Backgrounds



*Note: The Three “Circles of Japanese” is not based on any theoretical framework. Although it is loosely based on Kachru’s conception of World Englishes, it is only meant as a heuristic representation on where the participants stand with regards to their language proficiency to facilitate discussion rather than to imply any geopolitical role or power relations in Japanese.

Findings

In this section, I shall employ a dialectic approach when discussing the key findings. This is done by juxtaposing the participants’ narratives in the context of common emergent themes—namely, identity construction and language use, control over curriculum, and English as cultural capital. The purpose of doing so is to provide a lucid and coherent narrative on how their lived experiences interact with educational management practices.

Identity construction as a theme was present in all six participants’ interviews, although the degree to which it was important with respect to their language use differed. Of the six participants, identity construction and negotiation of positionality was a very salient feature for Isaac, Sharma, and—to a slightly lesser extent—Hiroaki, all of whom were bilingual from an early age. Both Sharma and Isaac discussed at length the struggles that they went through when constructing their own identities in relation to others’ perception as a foreign “other”. More specifically, both reported

negotiating their positionality vis-à-vis the dissonance between language and identity as perceived by other interlocutors. Isaac—a Japanese returnee who identified as North American—described how he used English during the early stages of his relocation to Japan to position himself with respect to his Japanese interlocutors:

“When I first came to Japan, I totally identified myself as [North American]...I don’t have blue eyes...[and] blonde hair...So I have to at first...pretend like I couldn’t speak Japanese, so that people would identify me as [North American]...I didn’t know the Japanese culture and...I didn’t know how to react in a Japanese way. So...speaking English was the way that I identified myself as a foreigner, which I wanted” (lines 128 – 147).

Despite years of acculturation and socialisation into Japanese cultural norms, Isaac’s struggle to negotiate between his Japanese and North American identities continued due to knowledge gaps in Japanese cultural assumptions, or *atarimae* (i.e. common sense):

“[P]eople expect me to be Japanese, and expect everything that they know is something I should know...I can’t live up to their expectations...I don’t know if it’s a merit for people to completely think of me as Japanese...Because then...people will just think...I’m rude or dumb...because they expect you to be exactly like them. But when they figure out that there’s something weird about you and they don’t know [you were raised abroad], they just like start assuming again that...you’re strange or weird, or you’re stupid or rude. It offends people sometimes” (lines 250 – 260).

Similarly, Sharma detailed her growing awareness of the complex relationship between language and identity in both her home country and Japan. This interplay of language and positionality extends throughout all her social interactions, as she chooses between her home language, different registers of English, as well as the occasional Japanese, when negotiating social distance and power with her interlocutors:

“I think [my home language] brings personal space very close and I don’t like that...it’s very subconscious...I feel like I can protect myself...so I use language to create...a safe distance...I do speak in [my home language]...but I know when I code-switch, it’s to be assertive and define my position in the conversation” (lines 387 – 400).

Furthermore, given her limited command of Japanese and relatively junior position in

the context of the hierarchy in her workplace, Sharma also uses English as a tool to negotiate social power and respect:

“I think English is so safe for me to maintain...equality. It's not like you are above or below, but of equality when they talk to me. Yeah of course I have to respect [my colleagues] but that respect should not [be]...because you are senior, like you speak Japanese, but because you are a human being...and we are all...the same” (lines 543 – 549).

In addition to reporting feeling more confident, articulate, and assertive when using English, her deliberate decision to not use Japanese in general arises from both the need to reduce ambiguities and maintain equality in social status, although she occasionally employs Japanese fillers to connect with her Japanese interlocutors:

“[S]ometimes I use fillers like *sou desu ne*, *naruhodo*, just to kind of get into the conversation. But I think knowing...the Japanese culture, I feel it's better that I speak in English, so that there is more transparency and directness in our conversations. Already, Japanese culture is so indirect and has so many layers, I feel when I speak in English, I break through those layers very clearly” (lines 429 – 436).

Also, related to Sharma's conscious decision to use English over Japanese—as well as Isaac's struggles with his identity—is the dichotomous essentialist conception of “Japanese-ness vs foreignness” when reconstructing one's own identity in relation to one's perception of imagined communities, which language socialisation theories—that focus on direct interactions with a local community—are unable to explain adequately (Kanno & Norton, 2003; see Duff, 2010 & Ochs, 1986). Despite coming from a different language background and operating in a different context (see Figure 1), Hiroaki also applied this dichotomous view to his own identity construction and characterised his own Japanese communication style as more passive and restrictive, whereas English, on the other hand, was associated with freedom and directness due to the cultural expectations of his interlocutors and his own educational experience:

“[During the immersion programme in high school] I was actively participating in the class, [I] didn't mind making mistakes in front of classmates...and luckily my teachers also accepted...my mistakes. So I feel like I kinda developed [the thinking that]...making mistakes in English is okay...However, as a native speaker of Japanese, probably the teachers expect...perfect Japanese...language use. So I

shouldn't...talk very casually to teachers or principal, or I should use honorifics...I shouldn't make mistakes in classrooms...So I think that [because of the] two different environment[s]...I kind of developed two different identities" (lines 90 – 107).

Apart from the need to meet the pedagogical needs of his students, his interaction with students and classroom practices also changes depending on the language he uses because of this perception of a dual identity (an English self vs a Japanese self). Despite being an expert English speaker, because of the need to accommodate lower-level students in classes where English proficiency levels are mixed, he chose to use Japanese; and this had a direct impact on his classroom practices, which contrasts sharply with the way he delivers advanced classes, where he used English as the medium of instruction:

"[When] I teach everything in English...I feel like I'm more aggressive...more active and...I asked more questions. Maybe in some ways, some of my students may feel...a little overwhelmed because I'm...pushing them. But...[when I teach using] Japanese...I don't try...[to] challenge them...I think I have never tried a discussion type of class in a classroom where I use Japanese to teach" (lines 168 – 179).

Compared to Isaac, Sharma, and Hiroaki—all of whom were raised bilingual since childhood and reported more awareness of the dissonance between their own self-perception vis-à-vis the expectations of their interlocutors—the choice of language use by the other three participants were characterised primarily as a pedagogical choice (which was also an important theme for the former group), rather than in relation to their positionality in the organisational hierarchy or their identities. Charles and Alex started learning Japanese in their adulthood, whereas Hector picked up Japanese in college. Although all of them reported using Japanese in the classrooms to varying degrees, the common reasons they cited for using Japanese included the need to (1) lower students' affective filter, (2) build a connection with students, (3) improve student motivation, and (4) ensure student comprehension, especially in large classes where English proficiency level among students is uneven. Reflecting Isaac's view that a bilingual EFL teacher's choice of language should be a conscious "pedagogical decision every time" to maximise its effectiveness, Alex highlighted multiple times throughout the interview the importance of exercising "flexibility" when making the decision to

switch between English and Japanese:

“We only have limited time and lessons...certain students are going to be left baffled if they don't get some kind of [Japanese] explanation...[Also,] I think it gives you a little bit more respect from the students that you have learned their language...and [if] the student's not getting it, it's not comprehensible input. If it's not comprehensible input, it's no value. I mean I could sit and listen to someone speaking Russian all day, for example, I've not got a clue what they're talking about...one of the responsibilities of the teacher, I guess, is to involve as many students as possible” (lines 72 – 148).

While he does not relate his own use of marked language with his own positionality within the school hierarchy, a recurring theme in Charles' experience relates to the degree of control he has over the curriculum, vis-à-vis his relationship with the Japanese co-teachers and his students. According to Charles, students—who are generally reserved towards him due to language and cultural barriers—become even less willing to approach him especially when another Japanese instructor of English is present, as the students would prefer to approach the Japanese teacher. This further alienates him from the students, and using Japanese was a way for him to gain some degree of connection with his students. He compared his co-teaching experiences with experiences of teaching alone, and explained how the expectation for foreign EFL teachers to use only English can sometimes be counterproductive:

“[T]he argument is, well, we need to expose the students as much as possible to English, but in reality...many students...turn off the switch when they hear English. So...it's kind of important to build the bond. And after the bond has been built, maybe...more and more English can be used...[W]hen I teach [alone] at the university level...I just throw in Japanese things when students don't understand or...usually a little cultural or little funny things to build the bond...[If] the main discourse is in English, and then of course I'm in control...[and] the students can't talk to a Japanese teacher. There's no escape for that. They have to talk to me...I think I've been more successful in creating bonds where I'm the only teacher there. But if there's a Japanese teacher there it's easier [for them] to go to the Japanese teacher” (lines 419 – 526).

Similar to Alex and Charles, Hector used Japanese in the classroom as a tool to lower students' affective filter. However, due to his lack of confidence in using Japanese,

Hector took the alternative strategy of embracing his lack of Japanese speaking skills by positioning himself as an English resource for his students (and sometimes his fellow colleagues):

“[I]n the classroom...I use English...like 100% [of the time]...and then there’s a sprinkling of Japanese vocabulary meant to...bring some humour to lower affective filter...[and] to clarify some vocabulary of the words...I know that my lack of confidence in speaking Japanese makes me use English more, but I do have this belief also that I should be a kind of source of, an English-only presence in the students’ lives” (lines 116 – 127).

Hector also discussed the hinderance posed by his lack of Japanese ability and challenges related to poor student motivation. To overcome these issues, he chose to be energetic around students as one of the ways to be effective without the use of Japanese:

“[M]otivation does play a huge role and by the time third year high school rolls around, you know, if they’re not motivated to learn English for their future, they’re definitely not motivated in...the English classes...I definitely tried to kind of temper that with my energy. So I’m really, like, highly energetic in the classroom and always smiling” (lines 169 – 176).

Therefore, depending on the personal resources available at the EFL teacher’s disposal (e.g. Japanese ability, cultural capital, or even personal qualities) the decision to use Japanese by EFL teachers can arise from very real pedagogical needs. Also, the decision to use language either as a divergent or a convergent strategy depends on their interlocutors, and this process of identity construction and negotiation of positionality can also influence classroom practices.

Curriculum control was a prominent issue for Charles and Isaac, and to a lesser extent, Sharma. While all three participants indicated to varying degrees that their relationships with Japanese co-teachers played an important role in the power dynamics in the classrooms, Charles and Isaac discussed how the foreign EFL teachers tend to be excluded in the decision-making process. Isaac related that although the foreign EFL teachers in his workplace tend to be more qualified, they tend to be excluded during discussions related to curriculum design, and this underemployment of foreign EFL teachers’ capabilities has a direct impact on educational practices:

“[I]n my [workplace]...the international [teachers]...have a stronger foundation

of language teaching education...and probably more practice too...compared to the Japanese teachers...So I don't see a reason why they wouldn't rely on native English teachers to...be more involved with the curriculum...[and] how to do things. Because I think just being told by the Japanese teacher, this is what you're doing, please do this, this is what we're using...it limits what...the native English teacher can do. I think...their full capacity is not being used" (lines 240 – 257).

Although similar to Isaac's view in some capacity, throughout his interview, Charles was more fatalistic in his outlook, and he accepted his lack of ability to influence the decision-making process—though not for a lack of trying—by shifting his attention to his own students and things within his control. He attributed this general reluctance by educational institutions to accept foreigners in influential positions due to cultural considerations:

"[T]here will have to be infrastructure changes...people feel threatened... [Japanese] teachers feel threatened for job security. Then there's also parents worry[ing]...my child will not be able to learn Japanese...I got really nailed hard... [a bilingual immersion programme] was the best way, I thought, but...they felt threatened quite a bit. And so Japan is not...ready for that kind of bilingual education...I don't blame them...Japanese education is not really designed to learn English...if they really wanted to, they could, but they really don't want to, fundamentally. But that's okay. We just know what the truth is and that's enough" (lines 676 – 714).

Although not discussed in relation to identity construction, Charles' view is reminiscent of the dichotomous "Japanese-ness vs foreignness" conception of imagined communities, where the EFL curriculum becomes a site of contestation between the conflicting agendas of the need to preserve Japanese traditions and institutions, vis-à-vis the need to improve English proficiency. While not mentioned explicitly by Sharma it was probable that her use of English to maintain equality in social status arose from a similarly marginalised position she found herself as a foreigner who speaks little Japanese outside of the key decision-making apparatus. Therefore, this illustrates how—despite seemingly disparate circumstances—the strategies adopted by individual EFL teachers to navigate their way through this contested site can be understood in the light of social structures that confer differing degrees of cultural capital upon them,

depending on where they stand in the “language circles” (see Figure 1).

Finally, with respect to the issue of cultural capital, what was mentioned in the interviews could be just as revealing as what was not mentioned. Out of the six participants, Hiroaki and Sharma—who are not from “inner-circle” countries—acquired English as a direct result of parental investment. In particular, Sharma described how the emphasis placed on English as a cultural capital displaced her acquisition of her home language from childhood:

“[M]y parents made it a point to speak to us in English, because they wanted us to have good jobs and...be really articulate, and they didn’t really pay attention on the fact whether we were developing our [home language] skills or not, which I regret now, because I can’t type in [that language], I can’t read a newspaper without looking at the dictionary and understanding the meanings. So I do think that for [people in my country], English, acquiring a high level of English proficiency is a matter of status” (lines 201 – 209).

On the other end of the spectrum, Alex—while he was aware of the political discourse on English education’s relationship with nationalism vis-à-vis cultural imperialism—mentioned that because of its deep cultural roots, cultural imperialism is not a real concern in Japan, and that the EFL curriculum should remain depoliticised:

“And of course, there is this thing called cultural, language imperialism...where people feel we not only force the language on students, you are also forcing...the Western lifestyle and ideals on the students. But...the Japanese I think are very firmly rooted with their culture, that there’s no real chance of them sort of giving up that kind of culture...So it [the discourse] became very political...critical thinking course in English...became very, very political. And it wasn’t sort of teaching them how to think, so much as what to think...it’s not fair to teach students what to think...[and so] English language teaching almost became political in some ways. And I really don’t look at it like that. I’m teaching...the basics of the language and how they use that language and how they deal with the languages is not my concern” (lines 418 – 465).

The stark contrast between Sharma’s own experience with language displacement in her personal life and Alex’s view that English education should remain depoliticised lies at the heart of the political discourse on English language education. One could point out that Alex’s view could also similarly be extended to other postcolonial countries,

and it still would not diminish Sharma's experience in anyway. Thus, on one hand, as an L1 English speaker in the "outer-circle" context, Sharma found both social power and disconnect with her own journey of language development and identity construction; on the other hand, as a largely monolingual British English speaker whose concern for his students' welfare is genuine, Alex's journey as an effective English teacher was not so much marked by the need to negotiate and reconstruct his own identity—which was taken for granted—but to improve his effectiveness as an EFL teacher. Language by its very nature has a powerful social and political dimension, and educational decisions from policymakers to parents are influenced by economic and political necessities—both of which are brought about by the historical path dependency of institutional practices that sometimes transcend international boundaries; and this contrast between Sharma's and Alex's lived experiences both epitomises and reflects the structural inequalities that EFL teachers find themselves in.

Discussion

The construction of identity and negotiation of positionality do not take place in a political vacuum, and the dynamic process in which the teachers interact with the social institutions they find themselves in can have real-world impact in classroom practices. The interviews show that EFL teachers—whether foreign, local, or from inner or outer circles—constantly negotiate their positionalities and identities, reflecting broader social structures.

While generalisability is limited, the overarching themes of identity construction and language use, control over curriculum, and English as cultural capital emerged as common threads for understanding the participants' lived experiences as highly qualified and experienced EFL teachers in the Japanese educational context. Although their disparate backgrounds make comparison difficult, they illuminate how the larger inequalities arising from colonial history continues to impact EFL teacher identity construction. Although I started out with Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital at the back of my mind as the theoretical lenses in the initial stages of this study, the analysis gained greater coherence in the light of Kachru's (1986) Circles of English and Norton's (2001) imagined communities as well. As I question my own positionality throughout the process of this study and its influence on the outcome of my analysis, it became apparent to me that cultivating an awareness of one's own teacher identity construction

can be an important part of professional development on an individual level. In other words, the development of one's own teacher identity could also involve developing and putting into practice the full repertoire of their own personal resources, including their multiple language proficiencies and personal qualities to be more effective in the classroom. However, this view of identity construction simultaneously places the onus on the teachers themselves to develop self-awareness of their roles in the broader institutions that can either empower or alienate them. As such, there is also a need on the management level to maintain an awareness of the preexisting inequalities associated with language education and introduce practices that alleviate inequities while improving educational quality wherever possible.

Language learning is now seen as a dynamic, lifelong process, rather than a static progression toward 'native-like' English (Strobel et al., 2020). However, the preference for "inner-circle" English varieties, referred to as the 'ideology of native English' (Yang & Jang, 2020), still strongly influences education globally. Furthermore, some researchers have also suggested that falsely equating English proficiency with acquiring an "inner-circle" English accent might potentially have an adverse impact in terms of learner investment. In a case study of an EFL classroom in a South Korean University, Ahn (2011) described how the conceptualisation of American English norms and frequent positioning of American English as the only legitimate variety of English by a South Korean instructor (who is an L2 user of English himself) led to a disproportionate amount of time spent learning American slangs and achieving an American pronunciation, at the expense of acquiring actual linguistic competency. Even more concerning, some researchers have also proposed using formulaic language, such as idiomatic phrases (which can cover anything from phrasal verbs to metaphors), as an automated measure of English proficiency. If such recommendations are adopted in high stakes standardised exams, it could have the effect of keeping out proficient English users who do not share the same sources of cultural reference, since the knowledge of idioms tend to presume cultural knowledge that might have little to do with actual communicative competency. In other words, a blind application of native speaker norms could extend the gatekeeping role of standardised tests beyond measuring language proficiency into measuring cultural competency, thus reinforcing preexisting structural inequalities associated with English learning and use.

Lastly, as a limitation, a feminist perspective is beyond the scope of this study,

although it is an important dimension in identity construction (e.g. see Yang and Jang, 2020). Thus, further research from a gendered perspective is necessary to more fully illuminate the process of identity construction. Furthermore, while it would have been ideal to triangulate the interview data with participant observations of classroom practices, this had not been possible given the constraints imposed by confidentiality concerns and Covid-19 restrictions at the time when this study was conducted. Nonetheless, the findings from this study provided an in-depth, emic understanding of how EFL teachers negotiate with the broader institutional practices, and individual experiences can have important implications on language education in Japan and beyond.

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Appendix A

Checkpoints for interview questions

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Language Use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Languages spoken and fluency level · Length of residence in Japan · How long have you been teaching in Japan · What brings you to teach English in Japan · What motivates you to teach English in Japan · Experience of teaching for the first year · Recall your first lesson · How do you use other languages (e.g. Japanese) in class, if any <p>Teaching Challenges in Japan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Challenges faced when you started teaching in Japan · Continuing problems / challenges when teaching in Japan · Tell me about the time when you had a challenging class / difficult student · How did you deal with the challenge / difficult student | <p>Self-perceived Legitimacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tell me about the time when someone challenged your authority · Why was your authority challenged · Tell me about the time you felt your authority was challenged because of your language · How much freedom do you have in planning your lessons |
|--|--|

Appendix B

Code book by individual participant

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT C CODES - CHARLES

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CULTURAL BARRIERS

- 1 - Learning Japanese
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability
- 1 - Linguistic essentialism (Japanese is more indirect)

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE

- 1 - Choice of language use with colleagues (interpersonal relationships)
- 1 - Choice of language use with colleagues (negotiating social distance)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classroom
- 2 - Choice of language use in classroom (use of Japanese threatens Japanese co-teacher)
- 6 - Choice of language use in classroom (connecting with students)
- 1 - Choice of language use in classroom (to manage student motivation)

EXPECTATIONS ON ENGLISH ACCENT

- 1 - Changing English pronunciation (is a double-edged sword)
- 2 - Changing English pronunciation (adapting to students)
- 1 - Preference for “native speaker” English (English accent affects hiring decisions)

STUDENT MOTIVATION

- 4 - Student motivation (poor motivation)
- 4 - Gap between expectation vs reality (theory vs actual classroom practices)
- 2 - Student motivation (entrance exams)
- 3 - Student motivation (grades)

CONTROL OVER CURRICULUM

- 1 - Control over curriculum (more freedom in universities)
- 4 - Control over curriculum (better student connection without a Japanese co-teacher)
- 10 - Control over curriculum (management)
- 3 - Control over curriculum (powerlessness / under-utilisation of foreign teachers)

8 - Control over curriculum (fatalism over lack of power)

8 - Control over curriculum (pushing for change)

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS WITH CO-TEACHER

6 - Managing relationship with Japanese co-teacher

1 - Preference for Japanese teachers

1 - Preference for Japanese teachers (authority)

1 - Preference for Japanese teachers (authority - Japanese teachers are more responsible)

3 - Preference for Japanese teachers (language)

1 - Preference for Japanese teachers (cultural distance)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT D CODES - SHARMA

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

- 1 - Identity construction (gaining confidence as a competent teacher)
- 3 - Identity construction (dissonance between accent and cultural identity)
- 2 - Identity construction (dissonance between self-image and others' perception due to accent)
- 2 - Identity construction (integrating multiple identities)
- 1 - Identity construction (use of English to project self-image)
- 3 - Identity construction (coming to terms with others' [mis] perception)
- 2 - Identity construction (projecting self-image through language – divergence from interlocuters)

CULTURAL BARRIERS

- 5 - Linguistic essentialism (Japanese is more indirect)
- 1 - Linguistic essentialism (Japanese is more hierarchical)
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability (barrier to effective teaching)
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability (barrier to communication)
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability (challenges to authority)

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE

- 4 - Choice of language use (adjusting to others' perception – accent)
- 1 - Choice of language use (negotiating social distance)
- 4 - Choice of language use (use of English to negotiate power and equality)
- 3 - Choice of language use (use of English to negotiate social distance – divergence from interlocuters)
- 1 - Choice of language use with colleagues (using Japanese fillers – convergence with interlocuters)
- 4 - Choice of language use with colleagues (using English to reduce ambiguities)
- 1 - Choice of language use in classroom (connecting with students)
- 1 - Student expectation (need for grammar explanation in Japanese)
- 1 - Using only English (poor student comprehension)

EXPECTATIONS ON ENGLISH ACCENT

- 3 - Changing English pronunciation (adapting to students)
- 8 - Changing English pronunciation (preference for “inner-circle” speaker norms)
- 2 - Changing English pronunciation (resistance to “debase” one’s own diction)

CONTROL OVER CURRICULUM

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS WITH CO-TEACHER

- 2 - Managing relationship with Japanese co-teacher
- 1 - Preference for Japanese teachers (language)
- 1 - Preference for Japanese teachers (connection with students)

ENGLISH AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

- 1 - English as cultural capital (English is tied to social status)
- 4 - English as cultural capital (parental investment in English education)
- 2 - Teaching without qualifications
- 1 - Pedagogical differences in English education between home country and host country

OTHERS

- 3 - Gap between expectation vs reality
- 1 - Gap between expectation vs reality (discouraging)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS E & F CODES – ISAAC

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

- 2 - Identity construction (projecting different identities in Japanese vs English)
- 2 - Identity construction (dissonance between appearance and cultural identity)
- 9 - Identity construction (dissonance between language and cultural identity)
- 4 - Identity construction (integrating multiple identities)
- 1 - Identity construction (adjusting to meet student needs)
- 1 - Identity construction (projecting identity through language – convergence with interlocuters)
- 3 - Identity construction (projecting self-image through language – divergence from interlocuters)

CULTURAL BARRIERS

- 1 - Learning Japanese
- 2 - Linguistic essentialism (Japanese is less tolerant of differences)

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE

- 4 - Choice of language use (adjusting to others' perception – language)
- 4 - Choice of language use in classroom (pedagogical reasons to meet student needs)
- 3 - Choice of language use in classroom (reducing students' over-reliance on Japanese)
- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to improve student comprehension)
- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (using Japanese shortens explanation time)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to manage disparity in a large class)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classroom (managing student anxiety)
- 2 - Student expectation (need for grammar explanation in Japanese)

CONTROL OVER CURRICULUM

- 1 - Division between Japanese English teachers and foreign English teachers
- 3 - Control over curriculum (greater control as a Japanese teacher)
- 5 - Control over curriculum (powerlessness / under-utilisation of foreign teachers)
- 1 - Managing relationship with Japanese co-teacher

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT G CODES – HECTOR

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

- 1 - Identity construction (embracing the language barrier)
- 1 - Identity construction (self as English resource - using only English with students)
- 2 - Identity construction (due to changes in degree of proficiency in Japanese)
- 1 - Identity construction (self as English resource - using English with Japanese colleagues who want to practice English)
- 1 - Identity construction (embracing the language barrier - high energy as strategy to overcome language barrier)

CULTURAL BARRIERS

- 3 - Learning Japanese
- 1 - Language identity (limited Japanese ability)
- 1 - Limited opportunities to practice Japanese
- 2 - Limited Japanese ability

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE

- 1 - Choice of language use with colleagues
- 3 - Choice of language use with colleagues (using Japanese – convergence with interlocuters)
- 1 - Choice of language use with colleagues (dissonance between appearance and cultural identity)

LANGUAGE USE IN CLASSROOMS

- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to lower affective filter)
- 4 - Using only English (poor student comprehension)
- 2 - Using only English (barrier to building relationships with students)
- 2 - Student motivation (poor motivation)
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability (challenges to authority)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT H CODES - HIROAKI

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

- 2 - Identity construction (integrating multiple identities)
- 1 - Identity construction (feeling different from others in home culture)
- 1 - Identity construction (self as English resource - using English with Japanese colleagues who want to practice English)

LANGUAGE IDENTITY AND INTERACTION STYLE

- 2 - Language identity
- 4 - Language identity (development due to different environment)
- 2 - Language identity (changes in attitude due to language use)
- 1 - Language identity (conscious switch in language identity)
- 1 - Language identity (switches in language identity became automatised)
- 1 - Language identity (more direct in English)
- 1 - Language identity (more passive in Japanese)
- 3 - Language identity (the need to follow Japanese norms)
- 7 - Language identity (freedom in English) - *more leeway in social interactions*
- 3 - Language identity (fear of making mistakes in Japanese)
- 4 - Difficulty negotiating social distance / hierarchy due to mixed language use
- 3 - Change in teacher interaction style due to language identity (laid-back lesson in Japanese)
- 4 - Change in teacher interaction style due to language identity (pushing students more in English)

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE

- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (pedagogical reasons to meet student needs)

ENGLISH AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

- 2 - English as cultural capital (parental investment in English education)
- 1 - Secure in own sense of authority
- 1 - Purpose of language education (to inculcate flexibility / open-mindedness)

OTHERS

- 1 - Relationship with students
- 1 - Gap between expectation vs reality (student motivation)

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT I CODES - ALEX

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE USE IN CLASSROOMS

- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms
- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (English essay-writing is grammar translation)
- 3 - Choice of language use in classrooms (pedagogical reasons to meet student needs)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classrooms (using Japanese shortens explanation time)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to manage disparity in a large class)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to improve student comprehension)
- 3 - Choice of language use in classrooms (to manage student motivation)
- 2 - Choice of language use in classrooms (garnering students' respect)
- 3 - Choice of language use in classrooms (explaining grammar in Japanese)
- 1 - Choice of language use in classrooms (using only incomprehensible English is not helpful)
- 1 - Motivation to learn Japanese (wanted to improve student comprehension)
- 1 - Motivation to learn Japanese (wanted to understand students' translation errors)
- 1 - Motivation to learn Japanese (wanted to help students)
- 1 - Motivation to learn Japanese (wanted to explain grammar)
- 1 - Pedagogical decisions to meet students' needs

STUDENT MOTIVATION

- 1 - Student motivation (grades)
- 3 - Student motivation (tangible rewards)
- 1 - Student motivation (how to improve)
- 1 - Student motivation (poor motivation)

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

CULTURAL BARRIERS

- 5 - Importance of awareness of ethnocentrism
- 2 - Linguistic essentialism (Japanese is more rules-based)
- 1 - Limited Japanese ability

ENGLISH AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

1 - Cultural imperialism

1 - Cultural imperialism (is not a worry in Japan)

1 - Cultural imperialism (discourse on cultural imperialism is political)

2 - Cultural imperialism (English education can become a vehicle of political indoctrination)

4 - English education should be depoliticised

1 - English as cultural capital (English in youth popular culture)

1 - English as cultural capital (explanation to students on why they have to study English)

1 - Teaching with no qualifications (appearance of a native speaker)

1 - Teaching with no qualifications (accepted status quo)

1 - Teaching with no qualifications (fear)

1 - Teaching with no qualifications (fraudulent)

1 - Teaching with no qualifications (subsequently obtained qualification to teach)

1 - Secure in own sense of authority